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SUBJECT: GERDEC: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

REF: A: TIRANA 242  
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TIRANA 00000265 001.2 OF 002

1. (U) SUMMARY: As Albanian leaders accepted their historic NATO invitation in Bucharest, the political fallout from the Gerdec tragedy continues at home. Despite the quick government relief response to the crisis and the resignation of former Defense Minister Mediu, a feeding frenzy continues to reign in the media, while the opposition maintains the steady drumbeat that the Berisha government has not assumed political responsibility for the tragedy. The Prosecutor General has launched an investigation into the blast that could ensnare other members of Prime Minister Berisha's government. With Bucharest pending, Socialist Party (SP) Chairman Edi Rama has exercised unusual restraint in attacking the government, but may no longer feel so constrained. So far, Prime Minister Berisha is weathering the storm and will certainly feel that the NATO invitation will strengthen his hand. More embarrassing revelations, however, or another incident at the unstable, still unsecured Gerdec blast site could plunge him into yet deeper political crisis. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) In the aftermath of the March 15 Gerdec explosion, the GOA has focused on a quick response to victims' needs and continued assistance to distract attention from questions of culpability. The government worked rapidly to clear approximately 4,000 residents from the blast area in the hours following the disaster and has organized relief assistance, including temporary shelter in some cases, for local residents whose homes were damaged by the explosion. It has placed a high priority on locating and identifying victims. The GOA is managing a relief fund that will directly compensate to local residents and victims' families, and it has welcomed U.S. and other experts (as well as donations) for the cleanup effort. Politically, while the Prime Minister sacrificed former Defense Minister Mediu within 48 hours of the explosion, he has declined to make further high-level changes in his government other than to replace Mediu with former Deputy Prime Minister Oketa prior to the NATO summit.

3. (SBU) The GOA's relief efforts, although rapid, have come at the cost of safety concerns at the blast site. Albanian military officials supervising the search for victims' remains at Gerdec have repeatedly failed to comply with basic safety recommendations made by U.S. military specialists from the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). (Note: A ten-member EUCOM team arrived within a week of the explosion to assess the situation and make recommendations regarding site cleanup, environmental risks, and assist with victim

identification as required.) The EUCOM team and Embassy officials have briefed both the military site commander and senior GOA officials repeatedly on the dangers posed by unexploded ordnance that litters the ground over a wide area and that was buried up to three meters deep under the surface by the force of the explosion. The GOA has been consistently told that it is unsafe for residents to move back into their homes until the blast area has been cleared of all ordnance, a process that could take years. However, Albanian officials for clearly political reasons have ignored this advice and have actually accelerated the return of Gerdec residents by fast-tracking the restoration of power and water services to the village. In addition to the risk posed by unexploded ordnance, the EUCOM team and the Embassy have also cautioned senior GOA officials that residents could be harmed by returning to live in structurally damaged dwellings and from environmental hazards resulting from the explosion.

14. (SBU) The government's other immediate reaction was to ask the Prosecutor General to begin an investigation, which continues to be followed by media outlets with great interest. Following some initial staff reshuffling, Prosecutor General Ina Rama has assembled a competent team within the General Prosecutor's Office. There has been much speculation about Mediu's fate. However, Rama has not yet requested Parliament to lift Mediu's immunity from prosecution, and he currently remains out of reach of most investigative techniques available to Albanian prosecutors. (Note: Mediu continues to be on the edge of the limelight. He said publicly March 30 that he would cooperate with any investigation, and was ready to allow the lifting of his immunity.) Speculation that Berisha or his son Shkelzen may have had an interest in the Albanian company that ran the Gerdec ammunition dismantling factory has not been confirmed so far, though it remains a popular topic of discussion in cafes and newspapers.

15. (U) The opposition has seized the opportunity to highlight the government's failure to protect the citizens of Gerdec. Media and opinion leaders alike have accused the government of a complete failure by the state in allowing the ammunition dismantling facility to be located in an inhabited area and to operate without regard to labor, health, environmental or safety standards. The relatively swift resignation of Defense Minister Mediu did not quell calls for

TIRANA 00000265 002.2 OF 002

further political responsibility, a drumbeat kept up by commentators, media outlets, and civil society groups. Majority coalition members have so far not criticized the Prime Minister as they address other aspects of the tragedy. With the Bucharest summit looming, opposition leader Edi Rama has consistently criticized the government, but with more restraint than his fiery personality usually exhibits, using his party deputies as a foil with their more pointed attacks. Ilir Meta, chair of the opposition's Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) and Rama's chief opposition rival, has been the toughest and most outspoken of Berisha's critics on Gerdec. Meta, with less of a chance to succeed Berisha, has the least to lose by pounding on the Prime Minister and much to gain from a thorough discrediting of his government.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: There is a strong conviction among the media, opinion makers, and the informed public that the government, despite its continued calls for a thorough investigation, is calculatedly seeking to evade any responsibility for the Gerdec disaster. For all that, Berisha is still very much on the hook politically: the public apathy exhibited in the face of other crises, such as electricity shortages or the 2007 local elections, is not evident on this occasion and none of the Prime Minister's efforts to get off the defensive appear to be working this time, no doubt because Gerdec has come to embody all the government's past failings in stifling corruption and putting public welfare first. The NATO invitation will strengthen Berisha's hand for the moment and as long as his Democratic Party stands behind him, there is little the opposition can do to topple the government. However, more embarrassing revelations about what his officials knew or did not know, or another explosion of the highly unstable and still unsecured munitions scattered about the Gerdec blast site could radically alter the political equation with extreme prejudice to Berisha. In any event, he will not enjoy heading into the 2009 election campaign in such a vulnerable situation.

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